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A CASE FOR MUSICAL NATIONALISM

By FRANCIS TOYE

THREE is probably no term so much used with reference to music now-a-days, and certainly none so vague in application, as the word nationalism. By that criterion, whatever precisely it may be, music is praised or condemned according to the various idiosyncracies of critics. Not so very long ago an important English review opened its columns to a rather acrimonious discussion between Mr. Cecil Sharp and Mr. Ernest Newman on the subject, the former maintaining that in musical nationalism, by which he seemed to imply a music exclusively inspired by folk-song, lay the only road to salvation, the latter asserting that it was a vain thing, fondly imagined. The great difficulty of the subject, as hinted above, seems to be that nobody is quite sure what the word 'nationalism' means. Everybody, more or less, feels that it postulates something to do with race, something to do with traditional songs and dances, something to do with environment; but the term undoubtedly represents a vague feeling rather than an exact definition.

Now the object of this article, without presuming to treat conclusively what might, not unreasonably, be the subject of a whole book, is to suggest that the racial significance of the word is untenable and the "folk-song" significance not of primary importance. The only sense in which the word has any real musical meaning is as signifying music and musicians in relation to the particular community wherein they exist.

Firstly then, what are the races of Europe the music of each of which which is supposed to have a peculiar flavour of its own? The great majority of people, not knowing or not stopping to think, always talk and act on the assumption that they are English, French, German, Italian and so on. But as a matter of fact, modern anthropology is increasingly inclined to maintain that in the real, the anthropological sense of the word there are, with insignificant exceptions, only three races in Europe —the Nordic, the Alpine and the Mediterranean.¹ Out of a mixture of these, in various proportions, are formed the different

¹See, for instance, Ripley: "The Races of Europe."

nationalities of modern Europe. Thus England is populated mainly by the Nordic race with a slight admixture of Alpine and Mediterranean elements; Italy by the Mediterranean race with an admixture of Alpine and (in the North) some Nordic elements; Germany by the Alpine and Nordic races, dwelling more or less in the South and North respectively; France by the Mediterranean, Alpine and Nordic races, comparatively unmixed, the first residing in the South, the second in the Centre and the last in the North. The so-called Slavonic and Celtic races simply do not exist anthropologically. They denote nationalities and languages, not races in the proper sense of the word; and it may be remarked in passing that it is precisely the loose interchange of these essentially different terms that has led to so much confused thinking on the subject.

Now it is quite possible that these races possess definite musical qualities of their own. For instance it may be true that the Alpine race—incidentally most if not all the great composers seem to have Alpine heads—can lay claim to an especial gift for harmony, as one anthropologist has suggested to me. And it would be very interesting to know what similarity, if any, could be traced between, let us say, the folk-songs of the Cevennes and of Bavaria, the inhabitants of both districts being practically pure Alpines. But that is not the point. When we talk now-a-days of musical nationalism, not even the most fanatical of musical patriots is so local in his patriotism as to suggest, for instance, that the inhabitant of Dorchester should rigidly confine his attention to the folk-songs of Wessex, or the inhabitants of Rouen be prevented from studying anything but the traditional music of Normandy. What is meant by nationalistic music is the music of one particular nation as geographically defined in the map of Europe. And in the racial sense it must be obvious that any such meaning is absurd. Otherwise we might expect to find some similarity between the folk-songs of the South of England and the North of Italy, and very little difference indeed between the folk-songs of any European nations. While, as a matter of fact, we know that, except in the comparatively rare cases where tunes are found to be common to many nations, there are enormous differences. Wherefore it seems to me that to rest musical nationalism on a racial basis is simply preposterous.

Nevertheless, just as different nationalities, despite their common racial origins, have evolved different speaking languages, so they have, (though of course in a vastly less degree) evolved different musical languages. We need not go into the question of

how or why this has happened. In the beginning, perhaps, the partiality of a tribe for a certain instrument led to a distinct outline of musical phrase; and the natural rhythm of the language must have helped to develop characteristic cadences in the music. For instance Mr. Dent points out in his excellent book, "Mozart's Operas" that the "squareness" of German as distinct from the asymmetry of Italian verse leads the same composer (Mozart) to set German and Italian words to a music noticeably different in kind. And what was true of a great composer at a time when the art of music was more or less fully developed must, I think, have been even more true of the hundreds of unknown composers who wrote when the art was still in its cradle. Besides do we not as a matter of fact all know certain well-defined differences between the musical contours of various nationalities? Who does not recognise the Wagnerian falling seventh as peculiarly German; the monotone recitative as peculiarly French? Moreover anybody familiar with Dowland and his Elizabethan contemporaries will, I think, notice a common, English factor of what may be called irregularity in their music. These differences, of course, are directly due to the inflexions of the various languages. And it is reasonable to suppose that, if a composer becomes accustomed to use a distinct musical phraseology in setting words, he will not be able, even if he so wish, to dispense with it when writing purely orchestral music.

To this extent at any rate the study of his national folk-songs is useful to a composer, in that it does teach him how to set his language to music and consequently—because all languages require different musical rhythms and cadences—how to give a distinctive flavour to his music in general. On the other hand, it is also true that some of the composers who best set their own language to music know little or nothing of folk-song. The most obvious instance to an Englishman is Arthur Sullivan, who certainly knew practically nothing of English or Irish folk-songs. Yet nobody can deny that Sullivan, whatever his other defects may have been, was a master of setting English words to music.

The fact of the matter is that folk-music—especially when it is as intrinsically excellent as that of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland—is quite admirable until people begin to make a cult of it. Further, about its practical utility there can surely be no doubt whatever. To composers of a certain type, from Moussorgski and Rimski-Korsakoff in Russia to Vaughan-Williams and Percy Grainger in contemporary England, it offers just the *point d'appui* necessary to make their music distinctive

and delightful; probably because their various mentalities have a natural sympathy towards it. But to pretend that no composer can be characteristically "national" without the use of folk-songs is ludicrous.

To begin with the converse is so palpably untrue. Serov and Rubinstein, even some of the Italian composers who infested Petrograd as their compatriots still infest London and New York, made use of Russian folk-songs. Yet their whole *locus standi* was one of opposition to nationalism and its apostles, the "School of Five." Because they used Russian tunes as thematic material they did not write Russian music—any more than Dvořák wrote American music because he used some negro melodies in the New World symphony.

On the contrary, it seems to me nonsensical to deny the qualification of "national" to some composers entirely unaffected by folk-song. For instance there is the Irishman, Arthur Sullivan, already mentioned. If his music be not typically British, the characteristic seems to me to have no meaning. The songs from his comic operas are known to every Briton, sung by every Briton and loved by every Briton. Moreover, they are, perhaps, one of the principal links between the English-speaking race in England and the English speaking race in America, as any English musician who visits the States will soon discover for himself. Surely we are not going to deprive him of his musical nationality because he did not find an aria on the tune of "The Cuckoo" or a dance on the rhythm of "Bean-setting?"

Moreover, Massenet, the typical French composer, did not, so far as I know, use folk-songs at all, any more than do Debussy or Ravel, both equally characteristic French products. César Franck (incidentally, a Belgian) on whom is founded the musical school which we recognise, and rightly recognise, as typical of modern France, did not concern himself with folk-music. The truth seems to be that the question is one of a certain feeling, a certain method of procedure, sometimes a certain orchestral technique rather than any inevitable worship of folk-music as such. A composer can no more flavour his music with nationalism to order than he can add a cubit to his stature, as Mendelssohn ought to have discovered when he tried to write a Scotch symphony. Nationalism is a kind of musical subconsciousness which may be instinctively called to the front, but never deliberately mobilised. To try to precise its quality in definite words were as impossible, not to say foolish, as to try to reduce the distinctive charm of an English landscape to its chemical constituents or to

describe the peculiar excellence of French *cuisine bourgeoise* in terms of scientific analysis. While sharing all Mr. Newman's dislike of loose generalisations, I refuse to believe that nothing has any real existence that cannot be particularised or defined as if it were a chair or a table.

Nevertheless it does seem impossible to formulate a nationalistic theory on any satisfactory aesthetic basis; nor is there any reason so to do. Given healthy surroundings and free play, the nationalism of composers will assert itself just in proportion to its vitality and usefulness. In a flourishing musical community, so it seems to me, there would be room for the nationalist and cosmopolitan composer to develop their talents side by side. That my own personal preferences favour the former I do not pretend to deny, particularly when, as in England, we appear to be rather at the beginning than at the end of a musical movement. But personal preferences are neither more nor less than personal preferences, and many people think otherwise. Besides it is ridiculous to lay down any general rule on a subject obviously so debateable. Are we to belittle the cosmopolitan Mozart because we admire the nationalist Wagner or eschew Tallis because we frequent Händel?

All the efforts of the musical nationalist, then, should be confined to the building-up of a distinctive musical community as self-supporting as possible. If this object can be obtained, it should follow, as a corollary, that the music produced will have the best possible chance of truly reflecting its environment. And surely that is the real artistic importance of the whole matter! When the anti-nationalist Mr. Newman asks us what is the common Italian denominator in the music of Verdi and Palestrina, he may imagine he has pulverised our defences by this *reductio ad absurdum*. But we may effectively ask him in return if he imagines that a country does not change in the course of centuries. As a matter of fact, does not Palestrina perfectly represent the Italy of the sixteenth and Verdi the Italy of the nineteenth century? Both composers—aye, and many more differing as widely—go to make up the distinctive whole that we recognise as typically Italian.

In the same way two composers such as Perosi and Mascagni represent two more or less distinct environments in contemporary Italy, the operatic and the ecclesiastical. They are dissimilar yet linked together because they dramatise, so to speak, two out of the many main characteristics which viewed in the mass *are* modern Italy. In different ways and degrees one finds the same

thing true of all countries. Sir Charles Stanford, freed from the tutelage of Brahms, often represents what we may call the public-school environment of England; Sir Edward Elgar, apart from his excursions into the music-halls, is very typical of Anglo and Roman Catholic circles generally; Dr. Vaughan-Williams stands for the ever-increasing number of people interested in the revival of folk-art.

Again, the music of both Richard Strauss and Humperdinck could not possibly be mistaken for anything but German, but the former represents the more truculent and the latter the more peaceable variety of German "Kultur." A nation, to borrow Bergson's cinematographic metaphor, is a whole story consisting of thousands of different pictures. A nation's music, to be truly representative, should be like unto it.

If then, as I believe to be indisputable, the ideal of musical art, like that of all other art, should be to reflect contemporary conditions, it would seem that the compulsory basis of folk-music preached by Mr. Cecil Sharp might be positively harmful. There is very little in common between our century and the times when Morris Dances and Folk-Songs flourished. These represented, as a matter of fact, one stage of culture, while we live in another. We know, it is true, that the special genius of a man like Moussorgski can make the most wonderful, so to speak, "up to date" use of traditional music; wherefore any attempt to axiomatise in a negative sense seems crassly foolish. But it must not be forgotten that neither Moussorgski's life nor his character were by any means typical of most composers. For instance, he was brought up in an atmosphere saturated with folk-song and democracy, so that, naturally, folk-music made a special appeal to him. The fact is that Moussorgski, like all other artists, was great because he really expressed himself, not because his means of expression followed any particular theory. Moreover, being Moussorgski, and not, let us say, Puccini, he was important because he had something of interest to express, something all the more interesting, perhaps, because his strong personality was coloured by the local Russia of reality and not by the cosmopolitan Italy of the Metropolitan Opera House, New York.

Incidentally, somebody may urge that nationalism, if it be but the interpretation of environment, may reasonably interpret some cosmopolitan environment, especially in these days of rapid communication. The answer is that it may and sometimes has, but that, on the whole, cosmopolitanism is fatal to serious art—

cosmopolitanism, that is to say, in inception not in effect, for the most local inspiration may have a cosmopolitan appeal, as, for instance, the music of Grieg. But the cosmopolitanism to be condemned is that which has no root in any country in particular. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it represents nothing but the *train-de-luxe* and the Ritz-Carlton hotel, an environment hardly worthy of artistic consideration. True, a great composer may, as he becomes famous, of necessity become more or less cosmopolitan. But the whole history of music shows that the foundations of his æsthetic structure must be strongly local, perhaps because only from the comparative quiet of a stay-at-home life can be drawn the strength and leisure necessary to educate his musical personality to its fullest extent.

In the æsthetic sense, then, musical nationalism is a question of domicile like divorce. But just as conjugal domiciles as a base for legislation have led to a lot of unnecessary muddle in the divorce laws, so I believe that musical domiciles, if considered as a base for generalisation, will lead to an unsatisfactory criterion of nationalism. We are not prepared to call Händel a typical English composer because he lived and worked so long in England, and we are not prepared to refuse to recognise Offenbach as the typical Parisian composer of the Second Empire because he happens to have been a German Jew, born in Cologne. Besides, all æsthetic generalisations are suspect now-a-days.

The only broad, general basis for nationalism is, I think, not æsthetic at all but social, economic. To the irreconcileable æsthete, hankering after the good old days of "Art for Art's Sake," such a nationalism will doubtless appear blasphemous, or, worse, merely vulgar. But the æsthete is a product of literary romanticism, and we have, it is to be hoped, left that behind us for ever. Yet the prejudice against a social, an utilitarian attitude towards the arts is very strong. "Metaphysicians, as well as psychologists," writes Hirn in his excellent book "The Origins of Art", "Hegelians as well as Darwinians, all agree in declaring that a work or performance which can be proved to serve any utilitarian, non-æsthetic object must not be considered as a genuine work of art." The admirable writer then goes on to show how absurd is this creed hitherto so generally accepted. He demonstrates once and for all that primitive art was not primarily æsthetic at all but utilitarian. Thus the pantomime in imitation of animals was definitely intended to attract animals by magic. Ornamentation, too, had a definitely religious or proprietary object, while love-lyrics were often severely practical. Hirn

proceeds to prove that the social factor in art is no less important for us now-a-days than for those whose culture was more primitive. His argument is roughly this: all the manifestations of sorrow, despair and the like, which are not wholly painful in themselves, are facilitated by the reciprocal influence of collective excitement. Thus all strong feelings, whether pleasurable or painful, act as socialising factors; and artistic production, being the most natural result of strong feelings, is therefore a socialising factor, too. Incidentally one of Hirn's remarks about music seems especially interesting. "There can be no doubt that, in whichever way the ultimate origin of musical arts be explained, their development is largely due to the practical advantages of rhythm."

To do anything like justice to such a suggestive work as Hirn's book is obviously impossible in a few lines, but no one who reads it will, I think, be able to refuse to accept his conclusion that "art is in its innermost nature a social activity." And music not least of the arts. For all art to some extent, as the art of pantomime to a great extent, causes the spectator to imitate the artist's feelings. Thus the musician helps the material-minded audience to share his own idealism, momentarily at any rate to exchange the matter of fact for the imaginative.

This being so, it seems to me that we are not only entitled but forced to consider musical nationalism primarily from a social point of view. "Cultured amateurs" may talk about the advantages of studying foreign scores; musical critics may argue about nationalist or cosmopolitan "schools"; partisans of the primitive may exalt a belief in folk-music to the sanctity of a religious dogma; all these different attitudes may be considered good, bad or indifferent according to personal tastes. But they are not sufficiently general to command or even to deserve universal acceptance. Only on a social basis, it seems to me, can the doctrine of musical nationalism be proclaimed absolutely unassailable.

For if music be a socialising factor, it follows that every society has a direct interest in maintaining an independent, healthy musical life of its own. It seems *prima facie* as absurd for a nation to import its composers and musicians as to import its army and navy. Could any Utopia possibly be called complete, that was unable to provide the music sufficient for its own needs? And if we may not aspire to the musical self-sufficiency of Plato's Republic, at least we ought to refuse ever again to condescend to the musical parasitism of Victoria's England. Our pride, if nothing else, should forbid us being content perpetually to borrow

composers and players from the rest of Europe; for to consume without producing is no more admirable in the domain of cosmopolitan art than anywhere else. The ideal of the "good European" should surely be to add to the common fund, not to live on what is already in existence. And to-day, when so much contemporary music suffers from artificiality and pose, there is an especial reason for England, whose best musical traditions have always been characterised by a certain freshness and spontaneity, to make her contribution to the European exchequer as substantial as possible.

Incidentally it may not be altogether inappropriate to remind ourselves that England, had she been as dependent on the continent for musical supplies as she used to be, would have had practically no music during the present war, that is to say during a time when music is especially needed to counterbalance the horrors of actuality. There would have been no conductors, no instrumentalists, and we should in fact have found ourselves in precisely the same position as regards music in general as the large public thinks (I need hardly say, quite wrongly) that we are as regards modern composers in particular. From the "topical" point of view, beloved of journalists, this is perhaps the most striking proof of the advantages of musical nationalism, of the supreme importance of assuring a livelihood to our own musicians.

But it is not the only one, nor perhaps the most convincing, in that great wars are, happily, still the exception rather than the rule. The value of music, from the social point of view, is greatly increased if it be composed and interpreted by actual members of the society to which it is intended to appeal. For instance, it is impossible that a Richard Strauss, describing, let us say, Munich in terms of music, can convey so much to the ordinary Englishman as a Vaughan-Williams writing a symphony about London. If he does, one can only say that music has entirely ceased to be in touch with ordinary, every-day life and has become frankly a luxury—in which case it is bound to perish sooner rather than later. The Englishman is familiar with London, and when the composer translates it for him into musical poetry, he can, more or less instinctively, meet the translation half way. Music may be a universal language, but a language is only intelligible if it talks of things we are able to understand. Those who write about music are too fond of treating the art as an end in itself instead of a means to interpret the indefinable something that hides behind all art. Thus, to have its maximum effect, the music of a nation must talk to a nation about itself, because

a nation rarely understands anything else. To soften the hearts of men, music must talk to them of their familiar ideals, their hopes, their fears—and how should a foreign composer know these as well as we ourselves? Heredity, climate, food, education, prejudice keep men apart long after the railway has annihilated the geographical distance between them, and the art, musical or other, that would make the greatest appeal to them must be rooted in these things. A nation with no music of its own is only too apt to adopt towards foreign music the attitude of the adder, which, despite protestations to the contrary, refuseth to hear the voice of the charmer, charm he never so wisely. It often pretends a vague interest in the charmer's personality; it discusses the colour of his tie, the pattern on his socks, and (especially) the length of his hair; it may even, if it is learned, talk a great deal about his voice-production, but it does not in reality *hear* his voice. In other words, it cannot force itself to abandon heart, soul and body to the magic of the charmer, though snobbery, fashion and pose may lead it to try and disguise the fact as much as possible. Thus, for the community to gain the fullest possible benefit from music, that music must be of the people, by the people and for the people. Above all it must be free from that sickening affectation which is the curse of so many modern musical societies. Not every nationalist is sincere, not every cosmopolitan a poser, but, on the whole, nationalism ought to work for sincerity, because it tries to extract from music the greatest possible benefit to the community by encouraging composers and executive musicians to be as far as possible typical of the particular idiosyncracies of the community.

It follows as a corollary that musical amateurs must lose no opportunity of supporting those of their fellow countrymen who earn a living by music. Bread and butter may be vulgar, but they are none the less indispensable companions of the artist. Moreover, grinding poverty and lack of recognition do not by any means supply that stimulus to the imagination which the rich and successful would have us believe. Neither, doubtless, does excessive prosperity. But when, as in England, the latter Charybdis is reserved almost exclusively for the foreigner and the former Scylla for the Englishman, one cannot be surprised that our musicians view the rarer, if more insidious, danger with complete equanimity.

Nationalism, then, does to some extent imply a measure of "Protection." Not that it should, for one moment, encourage inferior native at the expense of superior foreign talent; but it

should insist that, other things proving equal, preference be shown to the home product. Such a musical doctrine is especially desirable in England, because England, partly from social snobbery, partly from journalistic ignorance, partly from inherited prejudice as well as the prejudice of the cosmopolitan clique that dictates musical fashion in London, does definitely prefer the foreign musician to the Englishman. That is to say, equal talents being postulated, it is definitely easier for a foreigner, whether composer, singer, player or conductor, to "get on" in Great Britain than for an Englishman or Irishman or a Scotchman. And I have been told that a not altogether dissimilar state of things exists in America.

From every point of view this is ridiculous. Even at the risk of weariness it must be repeated that the exotic outlook which such an attitude implies is thoroughly unhealthy, and doubly so at a time when music, together with all the other arts, needs continual douching with normality and common sense. Indeed nationalism, far from being merely a question of the value of folk-music, is in reality a question of how far music shall bridge the chasm that at present exists between music and the life of every day—to the very great harm of both.